New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1944

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"Dear Ruth"

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NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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1944 PRODUCTIONS

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"Dear Ruth"

Comedy by Norman Krasna; staging by Moss Hart; setting designed by Frederick Fox; presented by Joseph M. Hyman and Bernard Hart at Henry Miller's Theater, Wednesday, December 13, 1944.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
December 14, 1944

Youthful Actress Saves 'Dear Ruth'—Dull Farce

By BURTON RASCOE

LENORE LONERGAN, who must be all of 16 years old, though a trouper of 10 years experience on the stage, saved a play last night at Henry Miller's Theater, turning an otherwise lifeless, machine-made and badly directed farce with a pulp magazine plot and dialogue, into a very enjoyable and frequently hilarious evening. Every time Lenore leaves the scene, the play collapses and falls flat on its face; but the moment she comes on again it takes on lusty and mirthful life.

Lenore's personal triumph in this Norman Krasna concoction, "Dear Ruth," is actually more sensational than Frank Fay's in "Harvey," Leo G. Carroll's in "The Late George Apley," or Billy Redfield's in "Snafu," for they had rich material to work with and are pivots around which other interesting and credible characters move, whereas Lenore is only on the periphery of the plot, a subordinated character among dummies, and playing only an elaboration of the same role, practically, that she carried with such success in "Junior Miss."

Droll Personality

Young Miss Lonergan's lines are rarely funny in themselves, and most of them are implausible and heavily labored. But she makes them sound very comical indeed. This is because she has a really remarkable personality, at once droll and endearing, and also because she has a curious husky voice, a remarkable sense of timing, an expression of adolescent boredom and patient superiority to adult stupidity, and an air of being at once slothful and full of dynamic energy. Her eyes are extremely expressive, when her mouth has no expression at all. That's why there is such an element of incongruity and surprise in every remark she utters, making her delivery dead-pan comedy of a fascinating type.

Without Lenore Lonergan "Dear Ruth" would be nothing. This is not the fault of the other actors; it is the fault of the author and the director. No actor last year turned in a better performance in a minor role than Howard Smith in "Manhattan Nocturne" and "Decision;" and yet he is required to play a father of 22- and 16-year-old daughters in such a mixed straight and stock comic style and required to say such manufactured lines that you'd never imagine he was a good actor at all. Virginia Gilmore and John Dall make a very attractive romantic couple, but Mr. Dall appears to have been directed to act as much like James Stewart as possible and Miss Gilmore as much like Margaret Sullavan as possible; and as a result both give the impression of losing their identities while trying to project them.

Story of Furlough

The plot concerns the situation created when a young gunner, veteran of 26 bombing missions, returns on furlough to claim the girl who had sent him her picture and opened a correspondence which, during an exchange of 60 letters apiece, ripened into an ardent long-distance love affair. It turns out that the girl (Miss Gilmore) is engaged to a 4-F bank executive and never heard of Lt. Bill Seawright (Mr. Dall); the correspondence is the forgery work of Miss Gilmore's kid sister, a little Miss Fix-it whose head is full of the current rituals and cliches of the extreme left wing press and also full of the rhetoric of the "institutional" ads, and who imagines she is contributing to the upkeep of soldier morale.

Lt. Bill has only two days before returning to the grim realities of war, so Ruth pretends she is the writer of the letters and intends to kid him along sweetly for the two days, rather than disillusion him and perhaps thereby destroy the boy's value to Eisenhower. She loves and intends to marry the man she is engaged to. This creates complications, for, as nearly every one in the cast is required to say at one time or another, the airman is "impulsive."

The play wavers back and forth between a standard soap opera romance and third-rate farce; it is timed too fast for the one and too slow for the other. It is kept from falling apart and made entertaining and enjoyable by the unique comic personality and superb performance of Lenore Lonergan.

THE CAST

Dora	Pauline Myers
Mrs. Edith Wilkins	Phyllis Povah
Miriam Wilkins	Lenore Lonergan
Judge Harry Wilkins	Howard Smith
Ruth Wilkins	Virginia Gilmore
Lt. William Seawright	John Dall
Albert Kummer	Bartlett Robinson
Martha Seawright	Kay Coulter
Sgt. Chuck Vincent	Richard McCracken
Harold	Peter Dunn

THE NEW YORK SUN
December 14, 1944

'Dear Ruth' Is Genial and Warming and It Brings a Hit Into the Miller

By WARD MOREHOUSE

THE hit-contagion in the New York theater has now spread to 43d street, and it's the Henry Miller's time and turn for jubilation. For into this playhouse last evening came a genial and warming comedy called "Dear Ruth." It will be right there for months on end.

Norman Krasna wrote this new play. The new managerial firm of Joseph M. Hyman and Bernard Hart has produced it. Moss Hart has come along with another expert job of direction, and a cast that works together superbly has brought out all the values of this slight, light piece, which will stampede the box office.

Here in paragraph three I pause to salute the playing of that oncoming young actress, Virginia Gilmore, and the extraordinarily engaging young actor, John Dall, who makes the impulsive combat flyer of Mr. Krasna's story both human and overwhelming.

"Dear Ruth" is farcial for much of the way and the dialogue and situations to go along with a mistaken identity plot, but for me the play's strongest appeal lies in its moments of sincerity, in the romantic interludes that come about when the dashing Lieut. Seawright, a veteran of twenty-five combat missions, comes back home to claim the girl he has never seen, but whose photograph along with countless poems and letters, have been sent by the girl's 16-year-old sister, whose active and all-inclusive mind brings in all phases of political science and world events. She never hesitates to send telegrams to the Secretary of War or to sign the name of Sister Ruth to her voluminous correspondence with the Air Forces lieutenant.

Mr. Krasna has written some bright dialogue for "Dear Ruth," which is in six scenes and two acts. There is humor and believeability about the people of his play and it is played unflaggingly by a cast that includes, besides Miss Gilmore and Mr. Dall, the irrepressible Lenore Lonergan, grown up quite a bit since her "Junior Miss" days, but still bringing her nasal whine and her sure comedy touch to all her scenes.

Howard Smith, an actor, now getting the recognition he deserves, is dry and droll and human as the father of the heroine. Phyllis Povah gives an amusing performance as the mother, and so does Bartlett Robinson as the precise-minded bank executive who loses Ruth to whom he had been engaged, to American combat aviation.

"Dear Ruth," blending farce with a romantic story, reveals the theater in a happy state. It's a play and a production that represents a combination of nice writing, knowing direction by Moss Hart and excellent acting. It will have one of those runs of "Junior Miss" duration.

So now the Messrs. Hyman and Hart, having brought forth a hit in their first try, may retire to the nearest tap room and congratulate each other. "Dear Ruth" is in the money.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
December 14, 1944

Line Forms On the Right

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE HENRY MILLER, for something like years to come, is going to be no help at all in easing the theater shortage. *Dear Ruth* is one of those surefire popular successes that, never missing a trick, get everything there is to be got out of a familiar but rewarding situation. It gets every last twist in the way of plot; it gets comedy laughs and farce laughs; it features the lively side of family life and the appealing side of romantic love. And to put it absolutely on ice, *Dear Ruth* has been cast with expert judgment and Moss Hart has directed it with consistent skill.

I can't say that I was personally knocked out of my seat (particularly during the first half of the evening) the way the rest of the audience seemed to be. But despite some reservations, I had a good time.

* * *

Dear Ruth grows out of the classic situation of the adolescent brat who corresponds in her older sister's name—in this case with an overseas flier. It is quite a correspondence, the older sister is an extremely pretty girl, and when the flier unexpectedly turns up, he is all set to marry her. The young lady happens to be already engaged to a rather pompous character, but since the flier will be off to China in 24 hours, Ruth agrees, from a sense of kindness, to play the part the brat has created for her. From there on the twists are many and amusing and ticklish and touching, but the end—which I need hardly describe—is always in sight.

Dear Ruth builds extremely well, and in the midst of its farcial curleycues finds time to give the flier's courtship its very human moments. The play also broadens brightly to portray family life as it is meant to exist in comedy—with a not too bright mother, a sharp-tongued but understanding father, and the aforesaid brat—an advanced if not entirely seasoned thinker who finds her family reactionary and sends caustic wires to Secretary Stimson.

* * *

As a result, *Dear Ruth* is popular entertainment that yields dividends in a good many directions. For much the same reason, it remains purely popular entertainment, having no compunctions about how it gets its laughs, hopping from comedy to farce, from romantic moments to ridiculous ones, from the humor that grows out of character to the gag that slides off the author's pen. All this scrambling has its good side, for as the situation develops it has to be kept amusing at any cost to avoid the emotional jam it would create by assuming anything like a realistic shape.

All the same, though much of *Dear Ruth* is funny and all of it has life, I found some of the joking rather forced, some of the gags unnecessary, some of the shifts in mood a little jolting; and though Lenore Lonergan does a very good job, I could have done with much less of the brat. That type of

character, in all its exaggerations, is getting to be a Broadway commonplace. I had much more fun out of relatively believeable characters like the father.

* * *

The father, to be sure, is played by Howard Smith, an unfailingly good actor who is perfect for the part. The mother is Phyllis Povah, and very good she is. Virginia Gilmore has the looks and charm for the part of Ruth—not an easy one, since it must be handled lightly and yet not comically. John Dall is excellent as the flier, whose part creates a similar problem. In smaller roles, there are nice performances by Bartlett Robinson, Kay Coulter and Richard McCracken. Frederic Fox's set is attractive, except that everything looks too new.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
December 14, 1944

Good Comedians and Good Gags Make 'Dear Ruth' Good Hoke Fun

By JOHN CHAPMAN

AS I sat watching "Dear Ruth" last night I was thinking of a movie director, a fellow famous for odd mannerisms and an odd accent, and famous, too, for turning out hit films. This quite enchantingly funny play, I thought, is a natural-born scenario, ready and waiting for this director to turn it into celluloid after a healthy run on the stage.

"Dear Ruth," as written by Norman Krasna and directed by Moss Hart, is a carefully manufactured, expertly packaged story about Young Love, with some more of "Junior Miss" thrown in just to make sure. You know that Scenarist Krasna is hauling you around by the nose every minute and pouring the old hoke into your ear, but you don't mind a bit because suddenly you have become very fond of its principal players—Howard Smith, John Dall, Phyllis Povah, Lenore Lonergan and Virginia Gilmore.

Whenever you go to a play nowadays your first thought is, of course, what kind of movie it will make, because that is practically all Broadway thinks about. You wonder which of the big Hollywood companies owns it, and how much this outfit paid the producer to put it on, and was the deal made outright for $250,000, and will it have to be rewritten for the screen or will the Hays Office pass it as it stands, and all that stuff.

Having Fine Time

So, naturally, I got to thinking about this director, Ernest Lubitsch, for "Dear Ruth" has that deliberately contrived, cannily maneuvered kind of clever unimportance which is sometimes known as the Lubitsch touch. If you start thinking about it, it's sunk; but you don't think and you have a fine time.

The plot is started by another one of those precocious adolescent females—an imaginative wench who corresponds with a bombardier in Italy and signs the name of her big sister Ruth to all sixty of the letters. So, naturally, when the bombardier hits New York on leave he heads right for Kew Gardens to make love to Ruth in person. This is somewhat awkward, for the unwitting Ruth is already engaged to a fellow who works in a bank and is therefore very stuffy on account of the bad ventilation in banks.

You see, it's a scenario, and anybody could invent it. What it needs is a touch—and this Mr. Krasna and Mr. Hart have supplied. They have filled it in with some very good gags and one explosively funny blackout line delivered by young Miss Lonergan, and they have routined it so well that its lapses are unimportant.

Howard Smith Perfect

My favorite in the cast is Howard Smith, who plays Ruth's father — a traffic court judge given to dry comments and keen opinions on the minds and conduct of two daughters and a wife. Mr. Smith's old vaudeville training makes him time every syllable just right, and he is thoroughly enjoyable.

Very pleasant, too, is John Dall as the bombardier, who forces his way amiably but determinedly through all difficulties and gets his girl. Miss Lonergan, as the trouble-making kid sister; Phyllis Povah, as the not too bright mother; Virginia Gilmore, as Ruth, and Bartlett Robinson, as the man from the bank, are also good company.

"Dear Ruth" has settled down for the Winter at Henry Miller's—but whenever it is made as a movie it will need a touch, for it must fool you at the beginning. It must never let you wonder how in the sam hill Ruth's kid sister could write all those letters, and get all those letters in reply—when obviously the answers were addressed in the sister's name and people in this country almost always get their own mail. A Lubitsch, or an Al Hall, could do it. A director like, say Ratoff wouldn't have the delicacy.

NEW YORK TIMES
December 14, 1944

Dear Ruth

By LEWIS NICHOLS

A DELIGHFUL comedy came to Henry Miller's last evening under the simple banner, "Dear Ruth." The work of Norman Krasna, whose allegiances have been divided between the two coasts and the Army, it is funny and charming and human—in whatever order those words read the best. With a good script to work on, and possibly to work over a little, Moss Hart has directed it to perfection, and it is in that manner the members of the cast play their roles. "Dear Ruth" probably is the comedy to end all comedies of juvenile misunderstanding, and last evening no prophet was needed to set down even odds that it will run at least until the end of the next generation. The new play can take its place beside "Harvey" and one or two others as being official reasons for going to the theatre.

* * *

Mr. Krasna is telling a tale of a couple of young girls. One, aged 16, wants to reform the world and so causes trouble. In one of her moments, she works up a correspondence with a gunner in a Fortress in Europe, and realizing she isn't so much, she signs her elder sister's name to the letters. The warrior arrives in Kew Gardens, of course, and tries to claim his girl who, as happens in Kew Gardens, is engaged elsewhere. The play deals with the misunderstandings caused by a couple of fiances, the young lady wishing to hurt no feelings and ending by hurting a good many. The bare bones of the plot are perhaps whitened a bit by age and contact with bright stage lights, but Mr. Krasna has not been one to stop with only a plot.

To tell his story, the author has set down some wonderful stretches of dialogue. Some of it is uproariously funny, and some deserves that whitened adjective, touching. "Dear Ruth" tells nothing particularly new, and it is clear as it opens how it all will end, but Mr. Krasna and his players manage to take their audience into the Wilkins living room and discuss the matter as the neighbors would. The Wilkins family jokes, bad enough jokes to be real family jokes, keep recurring through the play, like the notes of well orchestrated music. The two daughters are human beings, alive and real. The Judge who heads the family clearly is a gentleman who when a child signs him up for a blood donation can mutter, "I'm a traffic-court judge; let Frankfurter give blood." The Wilkinses live in other places of this land besides Kew Gardens.

The members of the cast and their performances are of a nature definitely superior. Virginia Gilmore, who has had a couple of bad roles in plays which did not linger long, now has come into her own as one of the better ingenues. She is the elder sister; where before she was merely wining, she now is an actress. Lenore Lonergan is the younger girls, whose interest in Russia, China, sex, democracy, the military, apples and women's rights can cause plenty of confusion. Miss Lonergan has come a long way in the ten or less years since she made a debut at the age of six. She now has bland, deadpan expression and a voice that sounds like a bullfrog with laryngitis; if anyone can make trouble in Kew Gardens, she can.

The Judge is another great man. Howard Smith is blessed with that role, the blessing being mutual; most of the out-and-out gags are his, and Mr. Smith doesn't stare down a good joke when he sees it coming. He is affable, matter-of-fact, calm—clearly the man who suspends sentence for minor infractions at Traffic Court. John Dall, ex the screen, is the young flier, giving a graceful and easy performance, and Phyllis Povah is Mrs. Wilkins. The mother roles in comedies such as this usually are not the best of the play, and Miss Povah sometimes suffers from that occupational hazard. he part of the young banker who is the real 'fiance is played by Bartlett Robinson who gives it the necessary suggestion that he will rise to vice president before long; and Kay Coulter, Richard McCracken and Peter Dunn have the other roles.

Having no daughters of his own, Moss Hart, in directing, has adopted the two Wilkinses—in fact, he had adopted the whole family. And for his own brother, Bernard, and Joseph M. Hyman, who produced "Dear Ruth," he has most expertly staged a fine comedy.

NEW YORK POST
December 14, 1944

'Dear Ruth' an Up-to-Date Version of 'Junior Miss'

By WILELLA WALDORF

"DEAR RUTH," produced last night at Henry Miller's Theatre, might easily be subtitled "Junior Miss in Wartime." Norman Krasna, who did not write "Junior Miss" but apparently admired it, pictures what happens in the Wilkins home at Kew Gardens, L. I., when sixteen-year-old Miriam takes to writing letters to American service men abroad to keep up their morale.

For reasons that are none too clear she signs her sister Ruth's name to the letters, many of which are made up exclusively of impassioned quotations from the romantic poets. The day Ruth becomes engaged to an upright bank executive, Lieut. Bill Seawright drops in from Italy under the impression that all he has to do is buy the ring.

From this point on Mr. Krasna piles up as many complications as possible and tosses in every gag he can remember, including several well-worn bits from past comedies of the same ilk. Some of it is very funny as comedies go these days. Much of it is merely routine, depending upon its performers to keep the laughs coming.

Howard Smith and Phyllis Povah as Ruth's distraught parents put on plenty of steam to carry the play over the rough spots and wind up panting but triumphant. John Dall is most beguiling as the deluded but impetuous lieutenant. Unfortunately, Virginia Gilmore, a young actress who has shown great promise in recent seasons, has little to do but play straight woman for the comedians.

That Voice Again

The sixteen-year-old culprit of the occasion is none other than Lenore Lonergan, the "Fuffy" Adams of "Junior Miss," taller, plumper, but still possessed of the same cracked voice and dead pan delivery. Miss Lonergan is a talented comedienne but if she keeps this up, that voice is going back on her completely one of these days.

Moss Hart, who directed "Junior Miss," has staged "Dear Ruth" with an eye to generating as much hilarity as possible, and last night's audience responded very snappily, roaring at just about anything. There is the customary Negro maid who cackles shrilly at the Judge's jokes, and at one point they even bring in a panda. Miss Lonergan has a drinking scene, with panda, that is humorous and derives, we feel quite sure, from "Harvey."

But then just about everything in "Dear Ruth" derives from something else, which is not to say much of it isn't comical. It will probably run as long as "Junior Miss."

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
December 14, 1944

A Darling of a Play

By HOWARD BARNES

UNDER Moss Hart's superb direction "Dear Ruth" gallops across the stage of Henry Miller's Theater with antic exuberance. It is horseplay to be sure, but it is in fine fettle. Norma Krasna's comedy about a flyer on leave is as much a vaudeville sketch as it is a play. Thanks to the ministrations of Hart and a superior cast, it is endowed with such robust and telling humor that it becomes one of the delights of the season. Chalk up another hit on Broadway.

* * *

The author did not have a great deal to define dramatically. He has conceived the not-too-original situation of having an impetuous adolescent correspond with an aviation gunner in her sister's name and has left the latter holding the well known bag. At the same time he has written bright dialogue and has contrived to make his characters so engaging that they sustain the frail plot with few laggard interludes. "Dear Ruth" is funny and sometimes touching. What it lacks in structural substance is more than made up for by the essential stuff of theatrical illusion.

* * *

Certainly there is a wealth of captivating entertainment in this new offering. Hart has never missed a trick in turning a situation or capitalizing on a curtain line, and he has been extremely fortunate in his players. They give the Joseph M. Hyman-Bernard Hart production the precise and ridiculous inflections which it demands. The family conclave is the center of the action. Off-stage nonsense merely accents the merriment. The family itself and a couple of uniformed invaders are human, amusing and curiously right. Complete credibility can go hang when one can sit in on dear Ruth's romantic complications.

* * *

Virginia Gilmore portrays the title role with grave and winning restraint, and John Dall is delightful as the fellow returned from twenty-five missions who takes her for the lass who has been writing him about Soviet sex freedom, poetry and abiding love. Even better is Howard Smith as Judge Wilkins, exploding over his youngest daughter's deceits and granting a paternal pat on the head to the youngsters who finally get together. Phyllis Povah has some good scenes as the harassed mother of the household. Lenore Lonergan plays the brash junior miss who starts all the to-do with proper burlesque emphasis and the others play their roles as though they were in Kew Gardens rather than on the stage of Henry Miller's. "Dear Ruth" is slight but eminently satisfying.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
December 14, 1944

'Dear Ruth' Presented At Miller Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

THE comedy which meandered objectively last night into Henry Miller's Theatre may well turn out to be what on Broadway, is referred to as a sleeper. If I know my Broadwayese, which I speak but haltingly, a sleeper is a play, a movie or a night-club conglomeration of which nobody expects a great deal, but which, in spite of negative expectations, turns out to be a winner. Such, I wouldn't be surprised, is "Dear Ruth," recently arrived in 43rd st., opposite Town Hall.

Norman Krasna wrote this unexpected flare-up. And Moss Hart, who knows a sleeper when he reads one, turned his magic attention to its direction. Which is surely why Joseph Hyman and Bernard Hart produced it, urging Frederick Fov to design its single setting and a company of well-considered players to act out the roles originated by the persuasive playwright. Because of their co-operation, Broadway had something to enthuse about last evening, something to stand in line about today.

"Dear Ruth" is one of those happy unpretentious coordinations in which you—or I, at any rate!— can't pretend to tell where the writing begins, the direction takes over or where the acting pulls both of them together. That's the way it should be in the theatre. That's the way it is at Henry Miller's.

Mistaken Identity

Basically, the story is the old Shakespearian standby of mistaken identity. Which is to say that Miriam Wilkins, a Little Miss Fix-It with World War II unduly on her mind, carries on a correspondence with a soldier under her older sister's name, supported by her older sister's photograph. Surprise! Surprise! Said soldier shows up on the scene and things begin to happen. With only 48 hours leave and 25 flight missions to his credit, Bill Seawright is in a lovelorn hurry.

He makes haste fast, believe me. As he does, nobody has the heart to disillusion him. Suppose Ruth Wilkins, Miriam's older sister, is engaged to a stuff-shirted guy called Albert Kummer. Bill Seawright doesn't know it. With only a couple of war-free days before him, Ruth goes so far as to promise matrimony. Here today, and, presumably gone tomorrow, what earthly harm can come of it? None! None, that is, until his overseas orders are cancelled and he is assigned to a spell in Florida.

The straightening out of this not-too-complicated—or unusual! —situation is what's left of the undertaking. The end is presumably a happy one, with Ruth happy, Ruth's mama and papa happy, Ruth's William Seawright happy and Ruth's little sister Miriam as happy as she can be with a brand new correspondent on her unhappy hands.

In the Groove

People will, more than likely, rave about Lenore Lonergan's misguided Miriam. So let's rave about her rightaway, and get it over. Now it's done, the more power to her! And it! Feminine hearts will flutter over John Dall, who, as the double-crossed soldier, the gullible guy who is kidded along and likes it, has what it takes. Virginia Gilmore is attractive, very, as Ruth. She has charm and is, if I may say so, Bill Seawright's—and the author's—dream come true in three, if not more dimensions.

Howard Smith is excellent as Judge Harry Wilkins. In a part which is humanly awarding, he plays with a sort of solid sincerity. Phyllis Povah, an upstanding admiration of this department, is as good, if not better, than usual. She is Mrs. Wilkins. The Albert Kummer of Bartlett Robinson is sufficiently sincere to gain sympathy as the stuffed-shirted other fellow. Kay Coulter and Richard McCracken are as they should be in secondary romantic roles, Martha Seawright and Chuck Vincent, a not overly hard-boiled sergeant.

"Dear Ruth," while not being what you'd call an important play, God forbid, is a pleasant addition to the bulging season. Rich in humor, replete with human interest, deftly characterized, it's a comedy which is nearly always in the groove. I say "Yes" to it, by all means. So, I'm sure, will you.

"Dark Hammock"

A melodrama by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, presented at the Forrest Theater Monday evening, December 11, 1944 by Meyer Davis and Sam H. Grisman. Staged by Mr. Denham; settings designed by Sam Leve; costumes designed by Kermit Love; lighting supervised by Jack Daniels.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
December 12, 1944

'Dark Hammock' Opens at Forrest

By ROBERT GARLAND

MARY ORR and Reginald Denham, who cultivated last season's "Wallflower" to the greater glory of Meyer Davis, have turned their theatrical attention to "Dark Hammock." This, as last night at the Forrest is my witness, is something else again. For this leisurely melodrama is a play about poison, relating how one Coral Platt tries to do away with her husband, Marvin, by means of the magic of her personality and the match-heads of those Swedish lucifers. You know, phosporus.

Sponsored by Mr. Davis, in conjunction with Sam H. Grisman, against a background by Sam Leve, in 1910 costumes designed by Kermitt Love, "Dark Hammock" wends its mildly murderous way toward a homey homicide in which wife Coral Platt spends five mid-Summer Florida weeks trying to do her husband in. That she finally fails is not our

THE CAST

Coral Platt	Mary Orr
Marvin Platt	Charles McClelland
Doc Bunnell	Scott Moore
Carlos Antuna	James Ganon
Belle	Mabel D. Bergen
Goldie	Alonzo Bosan
Andrew Jackson Sparks	A. Hunnicutt
Florence McDavid	Elissa Landi
Amelia Coop	Mary Wickes
Butch Smith	Alan Dreeben

Coral's fault. It is the fault of Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, playwrights, who, having worked themselves up to a situation, walk out on it.

Marvin Platt, the husband with the wifely finger on him, is a good guy and it's glad I am that the wicked wife doesn't slay him at the finale. An actress, but not a very good one, Coral is clumsy at her killing, and the end of the play, in which the would-be victim is saved while the would-be killer drinks the poison, is Shakespearian in its obvious contriving.

Bad Woman, Good Man

Here is the story. Coral and Marvin Platt are living on a farmstead known as "Dark Hammock," located on the Kissimee Prairie, Florida. For mercenary and amatory reasons, she wants to bump him off. But, being a female of the species who chooses to take her time, she's not in a hurry. Arsenic not being up her alley, she turns to matchheads. Day by day, evening by evening, she drops sulphur in his eggnog, his sherry or his what has he. He, being nature's nobleman, is unsuspicious.

When I see what a bad woman can do to a good man, I grow annoyed at my sex. But, being a good man, Marvin keeps on drinking matchheads, and pretends to like them. Sometimes they suggest onions, sometimes they suggest garlic, but never do they suggest extermination. Not until a lady doctor and her assistant arrive on the scene. Immediately, if not sooner, the lady doctor—Florence McDavid by name—amelia matchheads on the hammock. So does Amelia Coop, her assistant.

Needless to report, it is this lady doctor, aided and abetted by the co-operating Miss Coop, who trips up the wicked wife and saves trusting husband from worse than life. It is a pleasure to see, just a little before 11, the wicked wife drink the poisoned potion, while the trusting husband drinks the innocent eggnog intended for the lady. If this sounds a bit familiar, it is! Of such stuff, melodramas are made.

Landi Comes East

As Florence McDavid, the lady doctor, Elissa Landi is one more refugee from Hollywood. In case you've forgotten, as I have, that Broadway has seen her in "A Tapestry in Gray," "Apology," "Lady Has a Heart" and "Farewell to Arms." Miss Landi is also a novelist with "Neilson," "The Helmers," "House for Sale," "Women and Peter" and, for January publication, "The Pantry" to her credit. In "Dark Hammock," the lady is, in a word, straightforward. Which is what the playwrights ordered.

Mary Wickes' Amelia is excellent. Once, programs inform me, she worked in a film with Frank Sinatra and may even have touched him. You'll probably remember her as the Miss Preen of "The Man Who Came to Dinner," the most abused on-stage character since Pierre of "The Two Orphans." Charles McClelland, as the almost poisoned husband, is a good actor and a charming fellow. He, if I'm not mistaken, once did a hitch of horsein' in "Tobacco Road."

Mary Orr, co-author of "Dark Hammock," is on-stage as Coral Platt, a beastly part which she projects ruthlessly. I've admired her in Summer stock at Ivoryton, Connecticut. James Ganon, as the Carlos who is all mixed up with the Platts' finances, is sympathetic. Scott Moore's Doc Bunnell is a character-sketch worth mentioning . . . "Dark Hammock" is pleasant enough entertainment, obvious as to outcome, arresting as to action, and compensating in the long run—which I trust it may accomplish.

NEW YORK POST
December 12, 1944

'Dark Hammock' Is Very Slow Poison at the Forrest

By WILELLA WALDORF

MARY ORR and Reginald Denham, who wrote a comedy called "Wallflower" last season, have now turned out a new melodrama known as "Dark Hammock," produced at the Forrest Theatre last night. This sort of thing is Mr. Denham's regular line of work, but you'd never guess it from "Dark Hammock," a tedious poison case in the Florida cattle country featuring one of the most unbelievable lady detectives ever invented. Not even the quaint expedient of dressing the entire cast in 1910 clothes renders any of it even faintly plausible.

The title of the play is not, as you might think, something vaguely poetic, but the name of Marvin Platt's farmstead on Kissimee Prairie. A prosperous cattleman, Marvin is being systematically poisoned by his young wife, an ex-actress, who has visions of going back up North a widow rich enough to maintain an old lover in the luxury he craves.

To this end, she feeds her husband matchheads in his eggnog, and for a supposedly ruthless young fiend, she is remarkably unsuccessful at it. Marvin has been drinking phosphorus for quite a spell when the play opens, but is still able to navigate in a wheelchair.

From President Taft

The night she finally decides to give him a dose big enough to knock him out for good, who should turn up but a lady scientist sent by President Taft himself to study Florida conservation methods.

The poisoner is in such a pet at the untimely interruptiton that she acts very strangely, indeed, and since the lady scientist is not half-witted, merely coy, she suspects something is amiss. After a good deal of elementary snooping, she unearths enough evidence to make even the local sheriff think somethin' pretty funny must be goin' on around here, but waits a month before staging a very transparent hoax that foils the villainess and permits Elissa Landi to flounce around in triumph looking very arch, indeed.

Since Mary Orr is co-author of the play, she must think the part of the would-be murderess is something pretty fancy, for she acts it herself, sometimes quite well when her lines arn't too silly for anybody to get off without writhing in phosphorescent agony. Charles McClelland as her unsuspecting spouse and Mary Wickes as the lady sleuth's Dr. Watson deserve something better than what they draw at the Forrest.

The most satisfactory antidote for phosphorus poisoning—and "Dark Hammock"—is epsom salts.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
December 12, 1944

'Dark Hammock' Gets No Glow From a Case of Sulphur Poison

By JOHN CHAPMAN

WHEN the lady detective in "Dark Hammock" gets her first true inkling of what is slowly poisoning the Florida goon who is the victim of the play, she hauls a gallon jug out of the floor and gets the lights turned off and the jug glows.

Sulphur. From matches. A whole gallon of it. The only antidote is epsom salts. Fortunately the lady detective on the stage of the Forrest Theatre last night had some epsom salts, so the Florida fellow didn't die and leave all his money to his little itchbay of a wife.

I could have improved this melodrama by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham if they had asked me. In the third act I would have had this Floridian stripped, say, to the waist, and turned out the lights, and then HE would have glowed like the gallon jug or like Doc Rockwell's glass woman in "The Seven Lively Arts." This would have been socko evidence that the chump was full clear up to here with match-heads, and it might have scared the daylights out of you.

As it was, I didn't scare worth a hoot last night. I did admire seeing Elissa Landi as the lady detective, for Miss Landi is always pleasant to see upon a stage, and I liked Miss Orr in her role as the match girl.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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Lady Macbeth in Florida

By HOWARD BARNES

MEDICAL mumbo-jumbo is carried to considerable lengths in "Dark Hammock." The new melodrama at the Forrest pits an evil frail, deliberately poisoning her husband with phosphorus, against a lady doctor who catches on to her wicked scheme. The script is neat and sometimes effective. The acting, particularly that of Mary Wickes and Elissa Landi, is right enough for a chiller while the staging of co-author Reginald Denham points up the deviltry in the theme. The show still adds up as rather cold potatoes.

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What is chiefly wanting is a bit of reasonable suspense. The play shows is hand at the start, as one is taken into a Florida homestead in 1910 to find a young woman whittling the tops off matches to fix a lethal brew for her well-to-do husband so that she may keep her Yankee lover in proper luxury. The smart feminine physician, who arrives on the scene quite accidentally, makes no mistake about the murder for profit, but even Miss Landi cannot keep the plot interesting through five scenes. The ending, being exactly what you know it will be, is scarcely a smashing climax.

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To the credit of the piece let it be noted that Mary Orr, who collaborated on its composition with Denham, has conceived some solid situations and characters. It is only too bad that she did not write a better part for herself. As the Lady Macbeth of the offering, she is not particularly terrifying. Far better are Scott Moore, as an Everglades doc, who admits that he knows virtually nothing about medicine; Miss Landi, as the bird lover from up North who knows a thing or two about poison, and Miss Wickes, as her petulant assistant.

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The production does more than the sequence of situations to build up the melodramatic aspect of "Dark Hammock." Meyer Davis and Sam H. Grisman have given their show the benefit of sultry settings by Sam Leve, striking costumes by Kermit Love and excellent lighting by Jack Daniels. The Kissimee Prairie of Florida some thirty-five years ago is a novel background for would-be murder. The attempted homicide itself is only fitfully exciting.

NEW YORK TIMES
December 12, 1944

Lazy Hammock

By LEWIS NICHOLS

MARY ORR and Reginald Denham, who contributed "Wallflower" to another season, now have turned their collaborative attentions to the art of melodrama. "Dark Hammock," they call it, a tale of slow murder by poison in the Florida wilderness of 1910. Possibly melodrama is not their field; at all events their first try at it suggests that fact. Their play, offered last evening at the Forrest by Meyer Davis and Sam H. Grisman, is talky, pretty repetitious and not exciting—to name a few of the things that melodrama shouldn't be. With not much to work with, the cast apparently gave up somewhere along the tryout road, so that its members for the most part do not improve the evening either. "Dark Hammock" is one of the lesser chills, a very tiny shiver.

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The main people are a rancher who apparently is worth about $50,000 in land, conservative railroad stocks and cattle, and his blond wife. She had been an actress when he met her, apparently through pick-up, and, having once been on the stage, she had a longing for bright lights and a horror of Florida. In order to get the cash which might give her another start in the theatre — a cynical thought, this—she started to poison her husband by slow, easy stages. The system here was to spike the evening eggnog with a solution of phosphorus from matches, and she might have gotten away with it had not a lady scientist come down from Washington. This scientist was sent to study animal conservation, but by detective work and a system the secret of which will be shared here with no one, she manages to prevent the murder.

"Dark Hammock" hasn't a great deal to go on. The blonde who poisons her husband is by now the test of tired playwriting, and Miss Orr and Mr. Denham add nothing new to the literature on that subject. Their characters are not people who breathe, they are from careless story-book tales. Some of the figures, notably the scientist and her stooge and the inevitable fat, Negro servant, are coy to an extreme, and the would-be murderess is not believable. Part of the dialogue is in the "you picked a sprightly filly" style of vernacular, which can be sadly trying on Forty-ninth Street by night. The play seems to go on and on, talking about what it is going to do and then ending by doing very little.

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As befits the lady who collaborated, Miss Orr has one of the leading roles, that of the potential murderess. The part is not good, and Miss Orr fails to do much with it. She is attractive, but does not succeed in making a sinister figure of Coral Platt. No one can hate her very much, or feel sorry for her; the whole thing is negative. Elissa Landi is the scientist and Mary Wickes her secretary and friend; some of their moments as detectives probably deserve the adjective silly. Charles McClelland is the unhappy man who is drinking his matches, and Arthur Hunnicutt is one of the weirdest sheriffs of all time. Mr. Denham directed to bring out whatever action the play has; Sam Leve's setting is of a Florida living room.